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ABSTRACT

Recent theories that composition instruction should focus on the writing process rather than on the product have proven valid. A corollary, or a result, of this development has been the growing attacks on grades and grading. While evaluation provides effective instruction, grading is of limited relevance and may be misleading and harmful without modification. The first two grading steps, reading a paper and recording reactions, and identifying the inappropriate or incorrect (words, phrases) elements lead to the third step--summarizing the overall strengths and weaknesses of the paper. These steps may be the indirect basis for the final step--grading. But most importantly they furnish the writer with audience reaction and help to further his writing development. Grade symbols 'alone' are inadequate for indicating quality of work and reflect only one instructor's opinion. A viable and preferable solution would be a written statement about the student's writing ability included with the assigned grade. (JM)

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WHAT DO WE DO WHEN WE DO WHAT WE DO--AND SHOULD WE?

W. U. McDonald

In recent years, as you all know, discussions at our annual meeting and in journals have focused extensively on the process of writing perhaps more than its product, on composing as a method of discovery perhaps more than as a means of communication, on writing as a revelation more than writing as art. Although like any generalization these perhaps somewhat over-simplify the dichotomy and distort the emphasis, generally I believe you will agree they're true. It is also true that a corollary, if not a result, of these developments has been a growing attack on grades and grading, indeed at times on the whole act of evaluation. Perhaps an extreme example is represented by statements that to evaluate a piece of writing is to judge the student, and we are not judges.

In the light of this situation, I would like to look again at precisely what we do when we go through the series of responses and actions that end in the placing of a grade on a paper and ultimately on a grade sheet. Then I want to suggest that there is a distinction between evaluating and grading, that evaluating has instructional values we should not give up lightly, but that "grading" itself is of limited relevance and ~~considerable~~ actual harm to an otherwise valuable process.

Let me begin by defining briefly four steps I believe we go through when we grade. First, as we read a paper, we respond--with understanding or puzzlement, pain or pleasure, interest or boredom. Second--and almost simultaneously with our reading if we are "old

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hands"--we identify on the paper particular things--words, phrases, orderings of ideas in paragraphs, etc.--that seem to trigger our responses and we usually suggest revisions which could change them. Third, we summarize the overall strengths and weaknesses of the paper as we see them to indicate why it did or did not succeed in affecting us in the way it was apparently intended to, and probably we suggest revisions to make it do so. And fourth and finally, if we teach in most colleges and universities, we put on the paper a letter grade which is somehow related to the second and third steps that I have described and to the "grade" the student will receive for the course.

If we look at these steps more closely, we will see that most of them relate to our instructional purpose, some to our evaluative purpose, one not very satisfactorily to either. The first step, recording our reactions, certainly is not grading, though it may have some indirect connection with the grade that ultimately appears on the student's paper and on his permanent record. Neither is the second step--identifying on the paper particular elements that seem responsible for our reactions and giving suggestions for change. These oral or written comments may be the indirect basis for the grade (or our defense of it), but primarily they serve an instructional function: they transmit to the student writer an audience's reaction and, we hope, further his development as a writer. The third step--summarizing strengths and weaknesses as we see them and suggesting possible revisions in the paper as a whole--is, very clearly, both instructional

and evaluative. It is the first in its disclosure of the effects of the writing act and in its suggestions for revision. It is the second in its assessment of strengths and weaknesses, an assessment which presumably will somehow relate to the grade we will record.

These first three steps, which precede the recording of a grade, are--in both their instructional and evaluative aspects--legitimate actions by a teacher of composition, for they reflect the response of an audience who is also a teacher. And while one of course writes for the purpose of self-discovery, while one of course discovers what he knows as well as what he doesn't know in the act of writing, he also writes, eventually at any rate, for an audience as well. Part of learning to write is learning how to achieve with a particular audience the response we desire, and one function of the teacher of composition is to serve as audience. He may not be the only one--the students themselves are also appropriate audiences--but unless they are to write forever only for their peers, and surely this is not so, they need the experience of writing for--and having their writing evaluated by--audiences who react in a variety of ways to their prose, audiences who have had more and different experience and have more different knowledge than they. For, later, as they have occasion to write in the world outside, they will find that different people will respond to the same piece of writing differently. Students can obtain--in advance--this needed experience by writing for the composition teacher, who has read a variety of prose by people their age and older and who has had, or should have had, practice in assuming the

points of view of a variety of audiences. Thus to say that students write only for the teacher is not necessarily a condemnation.

Nor is it valid to reject our evaluative activities on the ground that to judge the paper is necessarily to judge the student. For the author is not identical with his art, the writer is not identical with what he has produced; and it is our obligation to make clear to students both the distinctions and the interrelationships between the two. At the same time we might well point out to them that some audiences will judge a writer by what he has written and that a writer should take this into account as he writes.

Now I do not claim that we always carry out these first steps perfectly. On occasion we may judge the student instead of his writing or we may judge a paper from our own point of view instead of making the necessary imaginative leap into the mind of the audience the student is trying to reach. We may not allow him to freely express his point of view, on the grounds that we are helping him to clarify his thought or to express it better. In our written comments we may also wound him by our negative or quibbling tone. But these are human failings of human beings which will inevitably be with us. They are not failures of a process that is basically sound, and if we perform these first three steps well the student will not only learn from our responses but be aware of the nature and bases of our assessments.

The inherent failure of the 'grading' process is in the fourth step in the conventional grading system. For here we are forced to

reduce a complex of observations and responses and evaluations to a single symbol, the letter grade, a manifest impossibility for a composition course. And why do we do this? Apparently so that we can ultimately report to the registrar's office an evaluation that is supposed to serve three informational purposes:--namely, tell other people in the university that a student has completed the course and indicate how well he has done so; contribute to the overall evaluation of his university work through his point average and thus determine when and whether he graduates; and inform (appropriate) people outside the university, such as admissions officers, prospective employers, etc. of what he has formally studied and of how satisfactorily he has studied it.

But for only part of these purposes--and the most insignificant part, I might add--is the letter grade adequate: it does report that in the opinion of the instructor the student has completed the course or has failed to do so. And it provides a symbol for use in determining his point average. Beyond that, it tells the recipients of that report almost nothing about his writing performance. Oh, it purports to: "A" equals "superior work"; "B" "very good work"; "C" "average work", etc. But what does it mean to say the student did "B" work or "very good work?" Does it mean that he wrote well in the course? If so, as judged against what? Against the writing of others in his class? some ideals in the instructor's mind? his own writing at the beginning of the course? his writing in terms of what he tried to do on particular assignments? And were the

assignments originated or chosen by the student or the instructor? Were they of a particular kind--expository, narrative? Did such things as attendance, meeting deadlines, etc. affect the ~~ranking~~ rating "very good work"? In all honesty, we have to answer that one can't tell from a letter grade. And as teachers of composition we also have to say, in all honesty, that the answers would in fact vary from one section to another in the same department. Thus the letter grade "B" says only that in the instructor's opinion a student in a composition course was very good at something in relation to somebody or something or some idea. This is all that it tells people within the institution unless they have heard through the grapevine something about the instructor or his course or his criteria for evaluation. And it may positively mislead people outside the institution, because they may assume it really says, "Yes, the student writes well, and whatever and wherever you ask him to write he will write well." Only we are aware just how false this assumption can be.

The fourth step, in short, tells the student nothing he needs to know--in fact, virtually nothing he did not already know from our comments on his papers. It tells persons outside the ~~university~~ institution nothing they need to know but perhaps makes them think it does. And it obviously tells people within the ~~university~~ institution nothing very meaningful. It adequately serves only the registrar: he gets in simple form a report that can be recorded and averaged by the computer, barely touched by human hands. It seems clear then that if the essential purpose of that last act in our process--the "grading"--is to record

in summary form an assessment of student writing performance, another means must be found--one that provides information that letter grades cannot.

Our analysis of the evaluative process tells us what such a means might be: a written statement to be included on the student's official record. It might include the following: the aims of the course, the types of writing assignments given, the opportunities for revision, a statement as to the strengths, weaknesses, and improvement in the student's writing, and--if a grade must also be reported--the major bases for arriving at the final evaluation (improvement, comparison with other students in the class, comparison with a set of criteria, attendance, etc.). With practice, this information could be given in 10 typed lines-maximum. Whatever its shortcomings, about which I will say something in a minute, at least with this method we would not be attempting the impossible--reducing the complex act of evaluation to a meaningless symbol. We would be preserving the integrity of the instructional-evaluative process through all its steps, and also achieving an accuracy and informativeness of reporting that the letter-grade system does not allow.

To those who object to having any record of a student's performance in a course beyond a mere notation that he completed it, this plan would obviously be unsatisfactory. For those who object that reflections of bias and idiosyncrasy may go into the evaluations, this plan at least has the merit of giving some indication of the values, biases or idiosyncrasies of the instructor who made the evaluation, a clear gain over the letter-grade system. These considerations aside, its

advantages as a replacement for the letter grade system should be apparent by now. But as an adjunct to any existing system--all-letter grade or a combination of letter grade and pass/no credit or pass/no record--it would also be an improvement because of the additional information it supplies. In a pass/no credit or pass/no record composition course, for example, it would provide a means for acknowledging the achievement of students who do better than passing work and would thus respond to their frequent complaints about lack of encouragement and recognition. In the letter grade system it could explain and supplement the unqualified C's and B's that we ~~at least would have~~ wanted to record as C+'s or B-'s or C++'s. ~~The comment will be~~ In either system, if desired, the comment could be a mandatory attachment to the student's transcript, but with the provision that it be released outside the ~~university~~ institution only with the approval of, or at the request of, the student himself.

To a registrar's office, this proposal for a written commentary would undoubtedly seem revolutionary and of course impossible. And without question in this computerized age it would add one more operation to the special handling category. But it has been my experience that registrar's offices can, without undue extra work and money, find ways to carry out record-keeping mandated by a faculty for sound educational reasons. Our registrar's office, for example, said it could not accommodate our pass/no credit plan for the first quarter of freshman English; but it has found it can do so, apparently without insuperable expense of time and money.

Some composition teachers, too, will doubtless object, initially at least, to what they see as extra work at a hectic time of the term. But I submit that as a replacement for the letter grade system this plan would involve no additional work and would, in fact, remove much of the agony associated with the process of arriving at final grades, because instructors would no longer be trying to do the impossible--namely, reducing complex evaluations to a simple symbol, making distinctions between a C+ and a B- because the difference is significant on the student's point average although relatively insignificant in assessing his writing. Moreover, in order to arrive at decisions on a letter grade, or for that matter a pass vs. no credit grade, surely we must do much of the work needed to write a brief assessment of the student's performance. Indeed, one hopes we have already made the kinds of observations and assessments on each piece of the student's writing that would be the basis for this final summary comment, that in fact the only additional time would be that required for expressing our conclusions in a short space.

The importance of a fair, informative evaluation and the advantages of the commentary method of reporting such an evalua[illegible] demand that we not be deterred by an immediate response of "impossible," but that we give serious consideration to one way of doing better what I am sure we all wish to do well.